

“No Individual Can Resist”: *Minima Moralia* as Critique of Forms of Life

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I. “The Question of the Organization of the World”¹

Can forms of life be criticized? Can we say whether particular forms of life are good, successful, or even rational? Since Kant it has been broadly accepted that happiness or the good life, in contrast to the morally right, cannot be determined philosophically. And since Rawls the ethical content of forms of life has been regarded, in view of the irreducible ethical pluralism of modern societies, as not up for debate. Philosophy has thus withdrawn from the Socratic question of how one should live and restricted itself to the problem of how, given the multiplicity of mutually incommensurable “comprehensive doctrines,” a just common life can be secured as the “coexistence” of different forms of life. The question of how we lead our lives has been consigned to the domain of unquestioned preferences or irreducible and unchallengeable identities. As with taste, there is no quarreling with forms of life.

This restraint is alien to Adorno’s critical theory. One sees this especially impressively in *Minima Moralia*. Not only the sensitivity and precision of many of its observations testifies to this, but simply the range of phenomena it is able to thematize, the directness and radicality with which it detects the “wrong” of social contexts in the most remote and apparently private attitudes. It deals with gift-giving and leisure time, hospitality and tact, relations with refrigerators or cars, how one lives and loves. “In the fanatical love of cars the feeling of physical homelessness plays a part” (§91); “We are forgetting how to give presents” (§21); “Technology is making gestures precise and brutal, and with them men” (§19).² The book thematizes the relation to oneself, to others, and to the other as shown in our most insignificant and meaningless daily tasks. It diagnoses a “sickness of contact” (§20), the development and limitation of modes of perception or the “encroachment of institutionally planned modes of behaviour patterns on the ever-diminishing sphere of experience” (§38). As Andreas Bernard aptly remarks, *Minima Moralia* is “Adorno’s attempt to spell out the alienation of the individual into its minutest ramifications in everyday life and to think the decline into barbarism from the invention of doorknobs, gift articles, and room service.”³ We should not be deceived by this concern with apparently trivial things: the critique of the “organization of the world” here stands for a fundamental questioning of our relations to the world and ourselves as a whole, beginning from the most

personal experiences and carried out in detail. Out of the phenomenology of everyday life a critique of capitalism *as a form of life* is assembled whose point is precisely that the border between public and private, the right and the good, universal and particular validity, is not so easily drawn.

The Attitude of Minima Moralia

The attitude that distinguishes *Minima Moralia* can be outlined as follows:

First: “There is nothing innocuous left” (§5). This sentence concisely describes *Minima Moralia*’s approach to its objects. Nothing is innocent. If the significance of phenomena is pursued “into the minutest ramifications of everyday life,” this is because under the gaze of *Minima Moralia* everything – from our relations with doors to gift-giving or politeness – can become a *particular* that stands for the *universal* of a form of life, in which the latter is mirrored and manifested.⁴ In this way every individual aspect stands for the whole; it can be deciphered as an instance of a context of social practices and institutions one can, with Hegel, call “objective Spirit.”⁵

Second: forms of life, as Adorno regards them, have a *truth content*. None of the phenomena examined by *Minima Moralia* is removed from critique because it is private or idiosyncratic. From Adorno’s perspective, questions about the shape and character of everyday dispositions, ways of life, and the orientations they express are imputed not only with significance, but with an implicit truth claim, against which they must be measured and criticized. Adorno’s sometimes breathtaking leaps from “ethical” to “moral” questions, from questions that in some contemporary conceptions are distinguished as those about the morally *right* and those about the ethically *good* life, lead us to suspect that Adorno does not take this division to be decisive.⁶

Third: another striking thing is the “material” character of his analysis. The attention of *Minima Moralia* is directed not only, like classical ethical questioning, toward the question of “how should we *act*?” or “what should we *do*?” It also asks, what *lets* or *makes* us act? It thus thematizes how the world in which we act is concretely and “materially” *organized* and structured and how this organization influences our actions and life possibilities within it. The character of things and our relations with them – the fact that we have forgotten how “to close a door quietly and discretely, yet firmly” (§19) or the authorial perception we assume when we get behind the wheel – thus become objects of investigation. Adorno hints at the idea behind this when he remarks, this time concerning slippers, “[h]ow some things have gestures, and so modes of behaviour, inscribed in them” (§72).

The Irreducibility of the Ethical

So can forms of life be criticized? Can one quarrel, with reasons, about forms of life? Even if one is critical of Adorno’s tendency to totalization, even if one does

not share the dark, hopeless mood that marks his reflections, one thing can nevertheless be learned from *Minima Moralia*: the ethical question, “how one should live,” cannot be bracketed out because it is implicitly or explicitly already answered in every social formation. Capitalism, as Adorno thematizes it, *as a form of life*, encompasses and shapes relations with the self and the world that precede and underlie all conceivable ideas of the good life.⁷ If one thus takes seriously Adorno’s observations about the social practices and (micro-) institutions, the approach to the world and modes of perception, the attitudes and behavioral dispositions that make up our life, the question of whether ethical critique is possible is in a certain way not rightly posed. Not despite but precisely because of the situation of modern society – the “immense power that takes hold of everything” (Hegel) – it does not allow ethical questions, as questions that always concern a shared form of life, to be pushed aside into the preserve of particular preferences and conditions.

Against the background of the discussion referred to at the outset, then, *Minima Moralia* represents a kind of ideology critique of the neutrality thesis, the basic liberal idea that comprehensive social institutions can and should be neutral with regard to particular forms of life and ethical reference points. To the extent, that is, that the ethical parsimony of political liberalism⁸ may be reaching its limit – and in my view there is internal as well as external evidence for this⁹ – the question of the ethical content and rationality of forms of life reemerges. What is thus to be gained from an engagement with *Minima Moralia*, perhaps precisely because of what now separates us from Adorno’s in some respects insouciant approach, is a renewed view of the problem of a context-transcending defense or critique of forms of life.

Here *Minima Moralia*’s characteristic tension between restraint and directness of critique allows it to break through certain narrownesses of the contemporary discussion. On the one hand, it opposes the liberal abstemiousness regarding the truth claims of ways of life; precisely the fact that life has sunk to mere “private existence” (Dedication, 15) is in Adorno’s view a manifestation of decline. On the other hand, the “reflections from damaged life” testify to the impossibility of direct access to the good life. As an approach to the Socratic question, it thus at the same time poses the question of this question’s conditions of possibility. Thus, compared to the ethical perfectionism of criticism that thinks it can argue from the essence or telos of human beings or human potential, *Minima Moralia* is restrained, but it operates with critical ethical criteria that are decidedly substantive.

Critical Method

In reading *Minima Moralia* (alongside everything else it may be) as a critique of forms of life, my interest is less in interpreting its various substantive motifs than in its critical method (without prescribing a separation between content and form

or substance and method). How, following *Minima Moralia*, can we apprehend, understand, and justify the truth content of forms of life? How can a form of life be analyzed and criticized as unsuccessful or “damaged”?

It has been said that *Minima Moralia* does not convince argumentatively so much as it effects “a characteristic engagement of agreement” that refers to a shared background by evoking the “imaginary refuge of the right life.”¹⁰ This may be the case insofar as *Minima Moralia* seems to be directed in a special way at the “disclosive power” that first lets us *see* things, connections, and phenomena.¹¹ But not only is its interpretive power not exhausted in making visible the previously invisible; moreover, Adorno is concerned with connections that can only be disclosed conceptually.¹² One underestimates Adorno’s justificatory claim if one overlooks the diverse ways argumentative figures are brought into play that can be effective neither *within* nor entirely *outside* a shared ethical context. The diverse moments of immanent critique in which Adorno idiosyncratically follows Hegel mark less a taking of distance than an expansion of what one can understand as “argumentatively convincing” when it comes to ethical questions.

Here the key to *Minima Moralia*’s understanding lies, on the one hand, in the connection between social criticism and ethics and, on the other, in its specific form of negativism. It contests the possibility of direct access to the Socratic question. On one side, the question “what should I do?” cannot be posed apart from the social institutions and practices in which it arises – the forms of life in which the action of the individual is embedded. On the other, it cannot be answered positively, but only by negating the wrong and uncovering the “damage” experienced by (the right) life. In the following I first pursue these two aspects before finally discussing the figures of negative immanent critique at work in *Minima Moralia*.

II. “The Objective Powers that Determine Individual Existence Even in Its Most Hidden Recesses”: The Connection Between Ethics and Social Criticism

Minima Moralia is at once an ethics and a critique of ethics. It is an ethics insofar as it lays out the problematic of life in contemporary (late) capitalist society by addressing the increasingly aporetic question of how the individual should act; the impossibility of right conduct – be it the impossibility of “dwelling” or the dilemma social tact has fallen into – thereby reveals the situation’s objective problematic. It is a *critique* of ethics insofar as the pathologies it thus discloses not only cannot be solved by philosophically determining the right mode of individual action; it also indicates a fundamental limit of ethical-normative determination – and thus social analysis as an effective and necessary component of the ethical enterprise.

Although it belongs to the logic of Adorno’s approach that the question of the “right life” is unavoidable, from his point of view it could nevertheless be called

an ideological mistake to believe that it could be *directly* or immediately answered. Precisely because it is already answered, because social institutions and forms of production and conduct are connected to ethical positions, the “practical question,” “what should I do?” or “how should we live?,” cannot be posed *as such*, in its pure form. If, as Adorno says, “[o]ur perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer” (Dedication, 15), only an epistemic position that thematizes how life *is*, and not just how it *should be*, breaks through this ideology.

Ethics and Social Critique

When Adorno thus moves “ethics into the realm of social criticism,”¹³ the connection he thereby establishes between ethics and social criticism is more complex than it initially appears. If, as Adorno explains, “the premise of ethics is the critique of the administered world,”¹⁴ this means not only that the good, virtuous, or correct life can only be *realized* if the administered world is criticized or overcome – since, for example, only then would there be the social-political preconditions for such a life. This would go only as far as the thesis (correct in itself) that the realization of the good life has supraindividual preconditions. But Adorno’s position goes further and has deeper methodological consequences. Adorno calls into question precisely the idea that the good life can be determined *as such* to serve as an atemporal, context-transcending standard, which would then only need to be carried out in a further step independent of its determination. The “critique of the administered world” is in a strong sense the precondition of ethics *itself* insofar as the wrong organization of the world in a certain way buries the good itself: not only its realization is threatened, but (with this) the possibility of determining it and finally its existence, even as a normative ideal. More simply put, in a wrong society the good cannot be *done*, cannot be *known*, and, independent of its realization, does not *exist*, and is thus not available as an independent (counterfactual) standard for right action. (This undermines all philosophy’s attempts to serve as a legislator for a problematic reality.) But in what way does the good life depend on the organization of society, such that it can only be realized in a society that is for its part good? Why is it not possible to determine and *know* what we should do in a “wrong” society?

The Alienated Character of the World

This thesis becomes accessible when we take into account Adorno’s starting point, what can be called the reified or alienated character of a “wrongly organized” world. “He who wishes to know the truth about life in its immediacy must scrutinize its alienated form, the objective powers that determine individual existence even in its most hidden recesses” (Dedication, 15, tr. mod.). Here we have not only the thesis that the individual is entwined in society. More important is

the understanding of objective powers as an “alienated mode” of the individual’s form of life.

What makes up the “wrongness” and the “calamity” of social organization here is not the sum of wrong or evil intentions of its individuals; it is not the result of different individuals lacking virtue or neglecting moral duty; nor is it so easily understood as the result of the wrong ways of acting of the rulers or the powerful. “No individual can resist,” Adorno writes (§18). This not only means that it would take an overwhelming or qualified majority to change the wrong organization of the world. It refers to the internal logic of relations which become an “alienated power” to those who act within them. It concerns something that people are at once responsible and not responsible for. It is this characteristically modern experience – the experience of alienation – that separates *Minima Moralia* from the classical ethical tradition.

The world, as Adorno sees it, is not only “wrongly organized,” shot through with domination; in its wrongness, it is theoretically as well as practically blocked, inscrutable and opaque to the individuals who at once are embedded in it and together constitute it. If the ethical question is to be posed, it must accordingly go deeper: to the conditions for individual action itself. What is wrong in society affects our ability to know and act at such a basic level that only by overcoming it would we be in a position to pose the “practical question.” The dissolution of this blockage – through a critique of ideology – is therefore the precondition of any access to the right life. Before we can pose the normative question of what we should *do*, we must first of all analytically put ourselves in a position to *understand* the conditions under which we act.¹⁶ So, at any rate, Adorno’s message can be understood, that

only by making this situation a matter of consciousness – rather than covering it over with a sticking plaster – will it be possible to create the conditions in which we can properly formulate questions about how we should lead our lives today. The only thing that can perhaps be said is that the good life today would consist in resistance to the forms of the wrong life that have been seen through and critically dissected by the most progressive minds.¹⁷

This is what *Minima Moralia*, in a way that may be “piecemeal” compared to its forerunners, undertakes.

The Context-Dependency of Virtues

If Adorno for instance claims that the classical bourgeois virtues, “independence, perseverance, forethought, circumspection, [have] been corrupted utterly,” this corruption can essentially be traced back to the fact these dispositions have become illusory in a particular historical situation: “For while bourgeois forms of existence are truculently conserved, their economic precondition has fallen away”

(§14). Dispositions that according to Adorno were once “good and decent” are false since they have become inappropriate in a social context in which (on his analysis) the mutual independence of economic subjects has disappeared, but subjects cannot see or admit to this inappropriateness. They thus cultivate the ability to act where they are in fact powerless – thereby, on Adorno’s logic, cementing their powerlessness.

Virtues are thus virtues only in a particular situation and with reference to particular circumstances in which they work and which work on them. The demise of their preconditions affects the virtues themselves; the good is not indifferent to its conditions of realization. Thus, precisely in the passages of *Minima Moralia* where Adorno comes nearest to a theory of virtue, he at the same time undermines it. Virtues have an effective context and can only be understood and evaluated with reference to this context. It is thus only the result of a fortunate historical constellation that at a particular point (that of the liberal bourgeoisie) they were correct, “good and decent.” This was the moment at which the pretension and reality were in harmony, the particular, individual disposition corresponded to the general effective context of this action.

Dispositions and modes of conduct cannot be called good or bad, virtuous or depraved, per se; they have, as Adorno remarks with regard to tact, their “precise historical hour” (§16). This goes beyond their situation-specificity, which according to Aristotle distinguishes virtues in general (whether a particular action is to be considered as courage, and thus as virtuous, or as rashness, depends on its context). Not only the realization of a specific disposition, but also its value, depends on circumstances beyond the individual’s control. “Independence and perseverance” are thus only virtues when they correspond to the situation; in an inappropriate situation they are wrong even as dispositions.

A remark of Adorno’s about Horkheimer (that applies just as well to Adorno himself) is illuminating in this context:

He refuses to think society as a kind of glass jar through whose solid but transparent walls one could see the realm of the true, beautiful, or good. Truth and the social life process are interwoven for him at the deepest level, not so that truth is socially relativized, but so that the shape of truth itself is continuously connected with the particular critique of social moments and has its standard in the idea of a right society, which constantly arises anew. Philosophy becomes in the most emphatic sense critical theory.¹⁸

If the “true, beautiful, or good” do not exist in a glass jar, they also do not exist undamaged somewhere “outside.” There is no originary, atemporal or external standard against which we could measure and on that basis criticize society.¹⁹ It must therefore be *within* society, without being identical to society as it in fact is. The “good life” thus exists, to the extent that it exists, only as a possibility inherent in reality – however distorted it may be.

III. Ethical Negativity: The Meaning of the Question of the Wrong Life

Adorno then contests the possibility of direct access to the good life in a second sense: the question of the good life can only be posed indirectly, as a question of how life is damaged. It is this position that one can call “ethical negativism.” If this negativism is not merely a self-deception, as Martin Seel suspects – a “trauma and dogma” from which one must save him²⁰ – then *Minima Moralia*’s approach to the damaged, “distorted picture of the true life” could be the condition of possibility of being able to criticize or take ethical positions with reference to forms of life without being perfectionistic in a strong sense. (As I argue below, this is not contradicted by the obvious presence of positive images and motifs in *Minima Moralia* as in Adorno’s work as a whole.)

But what does it mean to question *wrong* (or damaged) life? And to what extent does Adorno thereby evade the aporias and problems that are connected to the question of the good life? The reversal of the question is suggestive. The consequences and gains of this reformulation are, however, not self-evident. As mere reversal, approaching the wrong life would be banal, only a seeming solution. If the question of the *good* life cannot be posed, why should we be able to answer that of the *wrong* life? How could we know that something is wrong with the wrong life without making assumptions about the right one? In other words, how can we identify damage so long as it is unclear *what* is damaged and impeded?

Now, it can be argued that there is a certain *asymmetry* between right and wrong. “What the inhuman is we know very well indeed,” says Adorno in his lectures on moral philosophy.²¹ And this need not necessary mean that we have a complete conception of the “human,” the “definition of the human being,” or the “good life.” It is easy to know if people suffer; the diverse forms of happiness – and their conditions of fulfillment – are, in contrast, almost impossible to define. The negative conception of *Minima Moralia* would then be comparable to a line of argument that has become popular in the wake of postmodern liberalism. This is how, for example, Richard Rorty’s liberalism of contingency, following Judith Shklar, sees itself: as a theory whose highest (public-political) commandment is the avoidance of cruelty. This kind of conception is *morally sensitive* insofar as it makes it its task to identify sources of suffering; and it is at the same time *ethically parsimonious* because it conceptually restricts itself from references to positive values or ideas of a fulfilled life.

Liberal vs. Dialectical Negativism

This parallel is, however, deceptive. Adorno’s view that the task of moral philosophy is the “denunciation of the inhuman” has not only a different background but also different consequences than ethically abstemious liberal negativism. Not only is the thesis that suffering as opposed to happiness is easily recognized not necessarily true; happiness, too, is sometimes unambiguous, while suffering,

conversely, is not always immediately identifiable and accessible without interpretation.²² Adorno, as a critic of the philosophy of immediacy, knows this.

More important, however, is the fact that if one understands the methodological conception of *Minima Moralia* as analogous to liberal ethical parsimony, the spectrum of phenomena discussed and criticized by Adorno is simply inexplicable. In the aphorism *Sur l'eau*, in a discussion of the inappropriateness of counterimages oriented toward the “realization of all human potentials” to existing conditions, we find the remark: “There is tenderness only in the coarsest demand: that no one shall go hungry anymore” (§100). In Adorno’s analysis, however, the consequence is that a “liberated humanity” would not only “not go hungry”; it would also enter rooms in an appropriate way, close doors gently, and think “of the other as a subject” when giving gifts (§21). It might even regain its ability to “dwell” (§18), or “show [it]self weak” in love “without provoking strength” (§122). Even the call to *rien faire comme une bête*, the utopia of “lying on the water” that distinguishes Adorno from the (as he so nicely puts it) long-bearded naturalist’s activist ideal of the emancipated society (§100), evokes more than the mere absence of hunger or suffering.²³

Minima Moralia thus denounces more than cruelty. In what sense does how we close doors have to do with avoiding cruelty? Which cruelties would be prevented by doing away with giftshops or Hollywood movies? And how does Adorno’s brilliant deciphering of modern occultism as a “symptom of regression of consciousness” (§151) avert injury to someone?

Thus, *Minima Moralia* at least says what is *wrong*, and which life is wrong, not parsimoniously but substantively. Nowhere in all his departures from subjective experience is the validity of statements restricted to the idiosyncratically subjective. When Adorno remarks that “The bourgeois . . . is tolerant. His love of people as they are stems from his hatred of the truly human” (§4, tr. mod.), he is far from liberal value abstemiousness. Questions of the good life are for him obviously capable of truth and inseparable from the “less substantial” questions of a just or at least undamaged mutual coexistence.

Now, one could argue that in his analyses Adorno was after the *preconditions* for the avoidance of cruelty. The “withering” or atrophy of experience of which he speaks, the “freezing” of the world under the sign of objectified-instrumental relations, the badness and stupidity Adorno sees grow in himself “despite all his vigilance” after each trip to the cinema,²⁴ would then be the cause of a moral dulling that ends in cruelty or in any case insensitivity to cruelty. This is how we should understand the wild transitions in some aphorisms by which the fact that gestures have become “rougher” – from slamming doors to driving – point to “the violent, hard-hitting, unresting jerkiness of Fascist maltreatment” (§19, tr. mod.). Certainly there is a line in *Minima Moralia* that aims to expand our moral sensitivity and ability to perceive cruelty (against things or people). In decisive respects, however, it goes further and thus beyond the basic intuition of liberal negativism.

The Positive Universal

What systematically distinguishes the approach of *Minima Moralia* from positions within the liberal framework is the fact that, unlike them, it starts from a positive idea of a “good universal.” If the damages Adorno diagnoses are damages to always already supra-individual forms of life, his analyses of their shortcomings apply to this, in Hegelian terms, ethical [*sittlichen*] context. Accordingly, the analysis would always aim at another, successful, non-deficient form of this frame of reference.

A “right” society would not only not hinder individuals’ possible happiness, it would enable it. It would not only not restrict their individuality, it is its condition of possibility. We will “only become particular in relation to the universal” (§88, tr. mod.), writes Adorno. This positive reference to the universal goes along with a critique of the individualistic ideal of authenticity.²⁵ “Not only is the self entwined in society; it owes society its existence in the most literal sense. All its content comes from society, or at any rate from its relation to the object. It grows richer the more freely it develops and reflects this relation, while it is limited, impoverished and reduced by the separation and hardening that it lays claim to as an origin” (§99). Conversely, Adorno notes the paradoxical transformation of individuality and conformism into one another: “The situation in which the individual [vanishes is] at the same time one of unbridled individualism. . . . Within repressive society the individual’s emancipation not only benefits but damages him. Freedom from society robs him of the strength for freedom” (§97).

Where existing society is a “bad whole,” the scandal is not merely that the individual cannot escape its pressure to conform, but rather that he is deprived of the possibility of understanding, determining, and individuating himself with reference to and within a right society. And so there appears as a counterimage to “bourgeois coldness,” where “for people to live together under present conditions” is completely “impossible” (§16, tr. mod.), not the liberal idea of undamaged coexistence (and the corresponding idea of idiosyncratic self-realization in the sense of private uniqueness), but rather the idea of *another* way of living together, freed from the yoke of necessity and the coldness of instrumental relations, as the “unforced unity of differences.” What appears here is a variation of the (Hegelian) idea of “self-realization in the universal,” where only the universal provides the conditions for singularity and difference. If the liberal-negativistic abstemiousness vis-à-vis positive definitions of the good life is (also) motivated by protecting the individual as a being capable of suffering without smothering him in the claims of a substantive “ethical universal,” for Adorno the problematic looks different. Beginning with inverted forms of the universal and not with individual restrictions and damages by the universal, Adorno passes judgment not on the demands of the universal *in general*, but of a *false universal*. But then the strategy of “privatizing the good” must be misguided from his perspective.

Thus, on Adorno's view, the potential of ethical negativism is precisely not that it allows one to bracket the question of truth with reference to forms of life.²⁶ To the contrary, mediated by the negativistic approach, Adorno believes he is able to make this truth, and with it criteria for ethical critique, accessible.

Minima Moralia's negativism thus means the following. We cannot say how a liberated society would live, but we can analyze objectively what prevents it from doing so. Ethical questions therefore admit of truth without having a finished picture of the good, right, or successful life as the standard for evaluating them. But how can such an ethical critique of forms of life proceed without a perfectionist reference to the good life or realized human potential? And to what extent is this negativism, if it is to be ethically substantive, still negativistic?

Negativism as "Asymmetrical Reciprocity"

In order to approach these questions one has to examine the complex relation between positive and negative determination. If Adorno's negativism is a *dialectical* negativism in the tradition of immanent critique (in the strong, Hegelian sense), two aspects are central to this method: it begins with "what should not be,"²⁷ with life in its "inverted" or "alienated form," and it begins with the inner contradictions of what should not be, or with what in a bad reality pushes beyond it. Now, when the question is posed of how it is possible to begin with the wrong without having a counterimage of the *good* or *right* life, this perspective allows us to formulate two answers.

The decisive aspect of a negativistic approach in ethics or social criticism is, first, not that there can be no images of happiness or success. It is the insight that these positive (counter-)images are as such necessarily indeterminate and vague, so that one can be motivated by an indeterminate longing, but it does not have the power to generate positive models of "another reality." Therefore the positive – as a kind of anticipation – can only be determined through the mediation of what should not be. Uwe Justus Wenzel explains this conception of negativistic ethics according to a mode of "asymmetrical reciprocity": "The negativistic ethicist indeed draws what should be out of what should not be, but he does not deduce what should not be *from* what should be, but rather *with respect to it*. The positive is to be first defined, its preliminary conception first grasped, in the course of negating the negative." It is thus a "differentiated model... in whose framework the positive standard, though anticipated by a preliminary conception, is only concretized *via negationis*."²⁸

The negative ethicist is thus not absolutely without positive counter-images (a few are cited above) or positive experiences.²⁹ (It is Adorno who repeatedly points out that it is only the power of such experiences that allows one even to perceive the negativity of reality.) But he gives them a different status than the perfectionist ethicist. The compilation of lists of what belongs to a fulfilled, good human life, for example, which are widespread in contemporary

objectivist ethical approaches, must from Adorno's point of view seem almost abstruse.

One sees this in the moments Adorno cites. When, as with giving, his description of a bad state of affairs displaces the positive counterimage, when "[r]eal giving had its joy in imagining the joy of the receiver" (§21), he appeals to a potential, even ordinary meaning of giving. It does not, however, conversely follow from this that strictly speaking gift-giving belongs to a good human life, so that the success of a form of life can be measured by whether it allows social practices of this kind. The practice of giving is investigated because and insofar as it socially *exists*; because it knows different forms and has undergone changes, it allows us to experience a discrepancy between the reality and the possibility of such a practice.

Thus, there are in *Minima Moralia* the most various, in part only situationally defined counterimages to a bad reality (including attentiveness with regard to things and people). Nevertheless – and the negative ethicist must insist only on this – it would be senseless to ahistorically, disconnectedly draw up a positive image of the good. (Not for nothing are most so-called positive utopias marked by their simplicity.) Precisely where the dispositions Adorno (positively) puts forth become differentiated and expressive, where the images he evokes become convincing, their profile is sharpened by the fact that they are *counter*-images that acquire their shape from their opposition to existing dispositions and practices. And not infrequently the positive content of such models lies exclusively in a highly specific constellation, a balancing act between false alternatives Adorno achieves in dizzying moves.

If the point of Adorno's negativism thus lies not in the total absence of positive moments but in the fact that the positive does not stand unrelated to the negative as an abstract model, here we find the *second* essential aspect of Adornian negativism: the ideas, which he owes to Hegel, of immanence and determinate negation. The positive is not set up unconnected as a standard because it is to be developed out of the "inner normativity of historical reality itself" (Theunissen). The positive is thus not simply absent; it has been "overgrown" by the negative.³⁰ In precisely this sense critique means the critique ("*bestimmte Kritik*," linked to Hegelian "determinate negation") of "particular social moments" that "have their standard in the constantly renewed idea of a right society."³¹ The negative is then not only what *should not be*, but rather what cannot exist, what cannot be thought and lived, without contradiction.

IV. Figures of Critique

The advantages of this immanent-reconstructive procedure for the critique of forms of life are obvious. If standards of critique lie *within* forms of life or social reality itself, the normative criteria to be applied to it do not require justification; they are rather to be measured against the claim they set for themselves. The great

attractiveness of this method for Hegel's successors from Marx to contemporary critical theory has been that we seem to be able to escape the problem of the "empty ought" and ineffectual moralism, since what is demanded is already built into reality and not at a utopian distance from it. Or, as Adorno put it with his characteristic gift for lending new luster to familiar models from the left-Hegelian tradition: "Everything would be just as it is – yet completely different."

However, the conceptual problems connected to the procedure of immanent critique are not to be denied. How can one immanently connect with social-historical reality if at the same time one holds, like Adorno, that "the substantial nature of custom [*Sitte*], the possibility of the good life in the forms in which the community exists, has been radically eroded"?³² How can the standards of critique lie in the criticized reality and yet reach beyond it? It is clear that here the immanence of critique must mean something more and other than connecting to the value convictions available within a society (as conceived, e.g., by Michael Walzer). Yet here one seems to confront the problem of either remaining relativistic or referring to strong additional assumptions. The idea that there is a normativity embedded in reality that is to provide the criteria for its critique, beyond the affirmation of the factually available values of a particular, existing form of life, requires that this reality is at the same time itself normatively charged – as the embodiment of a reason that realizes itself in history, for example, as Hegel suggested.

This leads to a second problem: the idea, connected to immanent critique as determinate negation, that what is new and positive arises from the self-unfolding movement of a contradiction available in reality depends on an overburdening (or an unclear use) of the concept of contradiction. It is hard to say how the (logical) relation of contradiction is to be carried over to (practical) contradictions in social reality.

My suspicion is that Adorno reacted to this situation, even if he did not completely disclose this reaction. While on the one hand he vehemently insists on the immanent dialectical critique of what exists, on the other confidence in its inner normativity is lost to him such that he can no longer simply connect to it. In far from all the negative experiences collected here does "what saves also grow" (Hölderlin). We need only compare Adorno's "Theses Against Occultism" (§151) with Marx's critique of religion to appreciate the distance between the optimism of the one, for whom the critique of religion is the "presupposition of all criticism" (Marx) because he believes it can immanently turn the hope of classical religion in an emancipatory direction, and the other, who finds in contemporary occultism only a residue of religious consciousness, whose obvious craziness no longer counts against its social validity and resiliency. On the other hand, however, this does not mean that there is no standpoint from which to criticize occultism as false, as "lazy magic" and "the metaphysic of dunces."

Once again the interest of *Minima Moralia* consists in the balancing act it performs in its detailed analyses between standardlessness and the decisiveness of

critique. Here its strengths lie precisely where it can convince us phenomenally in its detailed procedure without being based on the aconceptual-immediate evocation of certainties or, as Rüdiger Bubner puts it, “the dark magic with which some of his formulas rest on prepared emotions.”³³

Argumentative Figures

I would like to indicate this with some of *Minima Moralia*'s typical argumentative figures. There is the figure of *discrepancy* between social reality and individual attitudes (including the self-understandings that go along with them). Thus, the bourgeois virtues mentioned above (§14) are inappropriate reactions to a changed social situation. As *untimely*, they have become inappropriate with respect to their own preconditions. But why is a disposition that is untimely in this sense, wrong? Even if a disposition out of which the life has already in a certain way drained is preserved – “The bourgeois live on like spectres threatening doom” (§14) – this alone would not be sufficient reason for the wrongness of the bourgeois form of life. Finally, there are values and dispositions that have become untimely remnants of the past that Adorno regards as correctives to a corrupted present. It is thus a matter of the particular effects of conservation: the maintenance of bourgeois virtues under altered conditions is an effect as well as a cause of individual and collective *self-deception*. Such dispositions are wrong because they prevent reflection and thus appropriate assessment of the situation; conversely, right action reflects on its effects and realizes the context in which it occurs.

What is decisive in this process is above all the models of thought, perception, and behavior that could be designated the *dimming of the universal*. “The caring hand that even now tends the little garden as if it had not long since become a ‘lot’” (§14) does not understand that the fate of the garden is connected to the fate of the outside world. “Privation,” to which “privacy” has sunk according to Adorno, feeds on a denial of the (universal) context in which the (particular) individual action occurs.

Now, what is wrong with tending one's little vegetable patch? Certainly it is Adorno's exaggeration, as malicious as it is methodically self-conscious, that establishes a necessary relation between caring for one's little garden and refusing asylum-seekers. But this exaggeration reveals an interesting connection: he who tends his garden without realizing what he is really doing becomes “impertinently malign” insofar as he does not understand his situation. He exercises against the asylum-seeker the power he lacks in determining his own life (“with the stubborn adherence to particular interests is now mingled fury at being no longer able to perceive that things might be different and better”). Under these conditions, caring for one's own, though not in itself reprehensible, becomes the other side of excluding the alien. And the less one's own *is* one's own, the more embittered the exclusion. The criterion for the wrongness of this disposition is thus the (again: inappropriate) reaction formation of *displacement*

and *compensation* – also to be found, e.g., where leisure activity can be decoded as “substitute enjoyment” for meaningless, alienated work or private intimacy as a reaction to the suspension of public effectiveness. What is wrong in this is not just the disposition but the false alternative to which it is forced to respond. An indicator of its wrongness, here as elsewhere, is the *coerciveness* with which the one follows from the other.

When, in the “Theses Against Occultism” (§151), fate is interpreted as “symptom of regression in consciousness,” in which the religious “need for transcendence” and the crisis of explanation in a world rushing toward structural secularism in its practical-technological infrastructure, the motif of social and individual *regression* comes into play. Following Max Weber’s theory of rationalization and his progressive history of world religions, modern occultism appears as a *relapse* behind the condition the development from monotheism to secularization had already reached: “Monotheism is decomposing into a second mythology,” “more untrue than the first.” If the first was in a certain sense innocently naïve, the “second mythology” of motivated misapprehension is guilty:

The [first] was the precipitate of the state of knowledge of successive epochs, each of which showed its consciousness to be some degrees more free of blind subservience to nature than had the previous. The [second], deranged and bemused, throws away the hard-won knowledge of itself, in the midst of a society which, by the all-encompassing exchange-relationship, eliminates precisely the elemental power the occultists claim to command. (§151)

Such a world picture is regressive in the strong sense insofar as it falls short of a given level of complexity – here we have motifs from the philosophy of history. It can in addition be criticized because it functions as “a rationally exploited reaction to rationalized society,” as “the complement of reification.” This figure, frequently employed by Adorno – the sometimes surprising demonstration of the complementarity of phenomena – draws its force from pointing to a particular form of contradiction: a disposition, world picture, or practice involuntarily serves precisely the powers it seeks to escape.

Inappropriateness

Other figures and motifs in *Minima Moralia*, and other, more or less argumentatively compelling critical criteria, could be enumerated. What we can take from this for the project of a critique of forms of life and with reference to the problematic of immanent critique, in my view, is the following.

What Adorno demonstrates here is immanent critique at its limits, critique that he drives as far as possible, even if the “good end” and the dialectical “automatic sublation” of Hegelian determinate negation is lacking, when the internal contradictions, discrepancies, and paradoxes or inconsistencies he pursues no longer

add up to contradictions pushing toward reconciliation. The discrepancy between social reality and possibility (“that things *might* be different and better”) remains a comprehensive protest against a world that negates this possibility. And the inability of particular forms of life to realize their own presuppositions is the decisive sign of their wrongness. But just this discrepancy is no longer squeezed into an internal contradiction in the strong sense, where the claim is dissolved into a reason charged with the philosophy of history. My suspicion is that the tensions and distortions Adorno discovers are better understood as evidence of different forms of *inappropriateness* – no less wrong, but perhaps less compelling, than contradiction.

But then, if we take appropriateness to mean both internal coherence and agreement, harmony and adequacy vis-à-vis a thing and an objective standard,³⁴ this above all indicates that the strong claim of an immanent critique of forms of life cannot avoid redefining rationality in history. Adorno thus leaves the critic of forms of life in the difficult position of the “miner in the dark” whom he describes in connection with the question of judging works of art: he “does not see where he is going, but his sense of touch shows precisely the nature of the crevices, the hardness of the resistance, the slippery places and dangerous edges and steers his steps, without it ever being left to chance.”³⁵ But Adorno does not spare the ethicist, like the miner, the task of showing objective criteria of success.

(Translated by James Ingram)

NOTES

1. “[A]nything that we can call morality today merges into the question of the organization of the world. We might even say that the quest for the good life is the quest for the right form of politics, if indeed such a right form of politics lay within the realm of what can be achieved today.” Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Schröder, tr. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 176.

2. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, tr. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), cited parenthetically by aphorism.

3. Andreas Bernard in Ulrich Raulff and Andreas Bernard, eds., *Minima Moralia neu gelesen* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 8.

4. It is no accident that *Minima Moralia* is the diary of an exile whose powers of observation profited from the fact that forms of life strike one as forms of life when they are foreign.

5. See for this also J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

6. Adorno in any case uses the terms “ethics” and “morality” differently than, for example, Habermas; see *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 12ff.

7. This does not mean that it always does so in the same way; here one need not follow Adorno’s assertion of totality and homogeneity.

8. I refer here to “political liberalism” as a *philosophical* position, as found in the extended field around the work of John Rawls.

9. Without being able to argue this here, I believe that this is shown *internally* in ethical debates around new (gene) technologies, which are based on fundamental ethical positions, and *externally* in phenomena like fundamentalism, which the Western world rejects as a form of life.

But even debates about education, child-rearing, or the cultural and social infrastructure of modern societies are always, at least implicitly, conducted against the background of ethical fundamentals.

10. Bernard, *Minima Moralia neu gelesen*, 17.

11. See Axel Honneth, "The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism," *Constellations* 7, no. 1 (2000).

12. In this sense Adorno definitively stands against the trend toward atheoretical forms of critique as propagated by such different authors as Rorty and Walzer.

13. Judith Butler, *Kritik der ethischen Gewalt* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 9.

14. "For in that second nature, in our universal state of dependency, there is no freedom. And for that reason there is no ethics either in the administered world." Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 176.

15. CITATION.

16. This means, if not the Marxist "unity of representation and critique," nevertheless a strong interpenetration, a mutual referentiality, of analysis and critique. It is precisely this connection that has been lost (or had never existed) in some currents of contemporary political philosophy.

17. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 167–68 (tr. mod.).

18. Adorno, "Radiorede über Max Horkheimer," *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), 20: 154. These remarks come in the context of explaining the connection between philosophy and society in view of the fact that Horkheimer was professor of both at the University of Frankfurt.

19. In this context it is not unimportant to recall that Adorno intends *Minima Moralia* as reflections *from*, and not *on*, damaged life.

20. Cf. Martin Seel: "From his youth Adorno always insisted that, under present conditions, freedom and happiness, morality and justice, the individual and social good in general, could only be determined negatively. They could be recognized only in their inverted form. This is, however, a flagrant self-deception. For Adorno's ethics radically takes as its point of departure positive – and, moreover, radically positive – experiences. The Proustian and Benjaminian motifs of redeemed time are still at work here with great power." *Adornos Philosophie der Kontemplation* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2004).

21. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 175.

22. This holds precisely all the more for the sense of happiness that Adorno employs, which is closely connected with (sensual) pleasure.

23. There is a characteristic ambiguity in "Sur l'eau." On the one hand, the utopia of lying on the water designates a postponement, a reserve with regard to the concretistic utopias of the long-bearded-naturalist doer. On the other hand – and this is the line of interpretation Martin Seel follows – it is a protest and a counterutopia to the doer's activist ideal: here the passive ideal of "leaving be" opposes the active realization of all human potentials. I would insist, however, on understanding this "leaving be" as a "leaving open."

24. "Every visit to the cinema leaves me, against all my vigilance, stupider and worse," Adorno notes in §5.

25. Even where Adorno speaks of "forming human cells within universal inhumanity" (§11), this does not happen independently of and by overlooking the universal, but precisely by including and with reference to it.

26. Once again we should recall that Adorno thinks the bad and the false, the untrue and the bad life, together. See Michael Theunissen: "Adorno's theme is the ontological negativity of what should not be, of the bad, which he can therefore only speak to because he has a concept of untruth that aims at a bad reality." "Negativität bei Adorno," in Habermas and von Friedeburg, eds., *Adorno-Konferenz 1983* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), PAGE.

27. Ibid.

28. See Uwe Justus Wenzel, "Negativistische Ethik?" in *Erfahrungen der Negativität – Festschrift für Michael Theunissen zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Markus Hattstein et al. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1992), 358.

29. Therefore the fact to which Martin Seel refers, namely that Adorno was inspired by images of fulfillment taken from childhood, does not indicate a self-contradiction within his

negativism. Not for nothing are dream images from childhood childish fantasies, phantasms, and wishes, moments of lost happiness caught in their untimeliness dominant here.

30. See Theunissen, "Negativität bei Adorno," 50: "But if the negative is the whole only as the dominant, then this by no means say that there is nothing positive. It only says that that in the existing world the negative has *overgrown* everything else. The negative can be recognized from within because it holds the positive hidden within itself."

31. Adorno, "Radiorede über Max Horkheimer," 154.

32. "What I would say is that the reason why the question of moral philosophy has become so very problematic today is that the substantial nature of custom, the possibility of the good life in the forms in which the community exists, which confront the individual in pre-existing form, has been radically eroded, that these forms have ceased to exist and that people today can no longer rely on them." Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 10.

33. Rüdiger Bubner, "Adornos Negative Dialektik," in Habermas and von Friedeburg, eds., *Adorno-Konferenz 1983*, 38.

34. See the collected volume edited by Merker, Siep, and Mohr, *Angemessenheit* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1998).

35. Adorno, "Ohne Leitbild," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10: 298.

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